

THE RELIGION OF THE PATRIARCHS :

a survey of the 'el epithets found in Genesis 12-50

by

Joseph B. Bustillos

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Adv. St.: Patriarchs
Ed Curtis, prof.

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Good work. You perhaps took on too big a task here, but you deserve credit for the attempt. You have done a good job. In my judgement there is ample evidence for terms like 'El at an early period. I think we can recognize that & use it as evidence for the early date for the events & the documents without seeing Israel's religion as borrowed or significantly influenced by Canaanite religion. In my view we can reject both van Seters position and the position of Cross. We can see Israel's religion as early AND as unique.

Beginning in 1966 with A. Alt's essay on the "God of the Father's"¹ many critics have set about to investigate the possibility of remnants of a pre-Yahwist religion being found in the Patriarchal narrative.² More recently John Van Seters, from the University of North Carolina, made an attempt to analyze the works, primarily, of Alt and F.M. Cross³ in this area.⁴ Using his work as a guide we will try to present the basic theory and hopefully some viewpoints that will help the evangelical understand this area of study.

For the moment we will give Van Seters his underlying view regarding the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis. The importance of this is seen in his first point; which is that the data that we possess in Genesis pertaining to the religion of the Patriarchs cannot be assumed to be either primary or dated early (pre-settlement period). He seems to base this observation on the fact that much of the religious language of the Patriarchal stories is common to the language of second Isaiah and is not found in pre-exilic literature.⁵

how one determines this would be debated strenuously by scholars

The foundation of this study is how one understands the 'el epithets in the patriarchal narrative, ~~to mean~~. We will look at six such epithets:

- 1) 'ēl 'elôhê yis'rā'ēl (33:20)
- 2) 'ēl bêt'ēl (35:7; 31:13)
- 3) 'ēl 'ôlām (21:33)
- 4) 'ēl ro'î (16:13)
- 5) 'ēl šadday (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25)
- 6) 'ēl 'elyôn (14:18ff)

It was Alt's point of view that these names represented "local numina worshipped by the indigenous population and only became amalgamated with the 'God of the Fathers' after the nomadic forefathers began to settle in the land."⁶ Cross and those that followed, however, felt that the epithets refer to the cosmic Canaanite deity, El, father of the gods and the god of the patriarchs.⁷ Seemingly in support of the last part of this last opinion, Walter Eichrodt in his Theology of the Old Testament writes:

All the divine names preserved in Genesis include the component 'ēl, with the sole exception of the pahad yshāq, Gn. 31:42-- a fact which is hardly to be explained as a product of tendentious emendation, since no stress is laid on the opposition to the Canaanite Baal and, in addition, the personal names of the patriarchs, the very foundation stone of the saga, indicate that their owners were El worshippers. Even Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph can be authentically cited as theophorous personal names with the component El, though this was dropped at a later period.⁸

(Eichrodt would also hold to an early date for the 'ēl epithets). Van Seters responds by writing that "the term 'ēl by itself is ambiguous because it can be the name of the god El or it can be the generic appellative for deity equivalent to 'elôhîm."⁹ As with other such terms, 'ēl

is therefore defined by its context. This is generally assumed by evangelicals to mean that unless otherwise noted in the context, 'ēl is to be understood simply as another word for God. The possible exceptions to this rule are the six 'ēl epithets which we are now going to address.

1) 'ēl 'elôhê yis'rā'ēl:

Jacob arrived safe in the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan---having come thus from Paddan-aram. He encamped with in sight of the city; the plot of ground where he pitched his tent he then bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred kesitahs. He erected there an altar and called it El-elohe-Israel. (33:18-20) 10

It is interesting to me that neither the Anchor Bible nor the Authorized Version translated the phrase El-elohe-Israel. In the case of the Authorized Version I found it easy to overlook and to miss the tension of the phrase. The tension obviously is whether 'ēl refers to the Canaanite god or just "God."

Van Seters presents three possible solutions:

(a) The first possible solution was first proposed by Cross;¹¹ which is that the word "Israel" refers to the patriarch Israel. The emphasis thereby rests upon the patriarch and the term 'ēl is then left slightly ambiguous. Van Seters finds difficulty with this reading because the more common usage for the epithet 'elôhê yis'rā'ēl is "god

of the people Israel" and that a "later Pentateuchal writer"¹² is responsible for making the phrase mean "god of the patriarch Israel." An objection to Van Seters' point is that at this point in the narrative the easier reading (that does not involve a canaanite deity) would be to see Jacob refer to himself rather than a nation that does not yet exist. (Again, if we are dealing with a later tradition leaving its impression on the narrative then Van Seters' point has some credibility).

(b) The second possible solution is that this epithet is an effort on the part of the patriarchal writer to equate Yahweh, the god of Israel, with El, the god of Shechem; For what reason---it seems to escape both myself and Van Seters.

(c) The third solution involves second Isaiah's usage of the term 'ēl.'

"You are my witness," oracle of Yahweh, "that I am 'ēl.'" 43:12;
 "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth,
 for I am 'ēl and there is no one else." 45:22;
 "Remember the former things from ancient times, for I am 'ēl and there is no one else, I am 'elôhîm and there is none like me." 46:9

He then asserts that the writer, ^{of Genesis?} must be saying more than that Yahweh is deity but that "'ēl must have the special sense of being the supreme deity and of being recognized ~~in as~~ such by other peoples."¹⁴ Therefore the phrase could read,

³El
 "God is the god of Israel" and be seen as echoing the implications of second Isaiah.

Frankly, I am far more at home with the first solution simply because it seems to be a more accurate reflection of the context and events that surround the passage. Also, acknowledging James Barr's work on the superiority of using a contextual hermeneutic over a comparative hermeneutic¹⁵ (not to mention that the relationship between the patriarchal writer and his usage of the word 'ēl' has not been substantiated to second Isaiah and his usage of the word), I find the first solution more tenable.

2) 'ēl bêt'el:

Thus Jacob arrived in Luz---that is , Bethel--- in the land of Canaan, together with all the people who were with him. There he built an altar and named it El-bethel, for it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother. (35:6-7)

Van Seters questions the accuracy of the Masoretic text by pointing out that 'ēl' is not found in the Greek, the Syriac, or the Vulgate.¹⁶ This may or may not be true but the real point is that the way the present text reads does not necessarily point to a ^Canaanite deity. It is explained later in the verse that 'ēl' refers to the God ^{who} that revealed himself to Jacob in the previous theophany (cf. 28:10ff) which is specifically referred in the text of that theophany as Yahweh.

A more difficult passage related to the theophany in Bethel is found in 31:13:

He (God) said, "Note well that all the he-goats in the flock, as they mate, are streaked, speckled, and mottled--- for I too have noted all the things that Laban has been doing to you, I the God (who appeared to you in) Bethel, where you anointed a stele and made a vow to me. Up, then, leave this land and return to the land of your birth. (31:12-13)

The hebrew text reads, "I am the god (of) Bethel (hā'ēl bêt'ēl) where you anointed a pillar..." Van Seters' reaction is, "Here again the text is probably defective."¹⁷ He then points out three things: (a) because of the article the epithet cannot be constructed as "god of Bethel," (b) by context, Bethel is a place-name and not the name of this deity, i.e., "the god, Bethel," (c) he therefore ~~accepts use of~~ ^{the Hebrew text presumed to underlie} the longer Greek text: hā'ēl hannir'ēh 'ēleyā b^e bêt'ēl," primarily because it satisfies all of the grammatical problems.

At this point I am somewhat at a loss due to my ignorance of proper Hebrew grammar, but just as a principle of language in general I am aware of the demonstrative/ specifying nature of the article.¹⁸ Therefore, the use of el bêt'el the article in the above cited verse can be understood as ^{the particular construction} ~~(without the article on the word 'el)~~ ^{would have to be translated} being used to point out (to Jacob ? and his readership) that the author is not referring to just "a god" or "any god" of Bethel, but to "the (one) God" that Jacob knew ^(became the god of Bethel).

~~that~~ ^{that} Bethel, a proper noun determines the definiteness of the preceding noun in the construct state.

aware of) while at Bethel. The Greek additions would, therefore, be easily understood as the later Greek compilers attempt at explaining what we just explained using the article and the verses' context.

The next two epithets Van Seters deals with in short order. They are: 'ēl 'ôlām (21:33) and 'ēl ro'î (16:13-14).

3) 'ēl 'ôlām:

As for Abraham, he planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and there he involved the name of Yahweh, the Eternal God. (21:33)

4) 'ēl ro'î:

And Yahweh who had spoken to her she called by the name "You are El-ro'i," by which she meant, "Did I not go on seeing here after he had seen me?" (16:33) 19

Regarding 'ēl 'ôlām Cross writes, " 'ôlām is very ancient in West Semitic and may be especially appropriate for the god, 'ēl."²⁰ That this epithet appears in such close proximity to the name Yahweh should warrant some caution on the part of some scholars when attributing 'ēl 'ôlām to the canaanite 'ēl. Van Seters' conclusion is, "Just how and when the religion of Yahweh acquired this and other epithets is a matter of speculation about which the text of Genesis can tell us nothing."²¹

Regarding 'ēl ro'î Van Seters throws it out as a true epithet because it cannot stand as a pre-existing Canaanite deity apart from the narrative.²² The word is simply used

to make a connection between the story and the place-name, Lahairoi.

The last two epithets that he addresses are a bit more difficult (and wisely dealt with at the end of his article).

5) 'el šadday:

The God of your fathers who aids you,
Shaddai who grants you his blessings---
Blessings of heaven above
Of the deep that couches below,
Blessings of breast and womb. (49:25)

It is here in Van Seters' analysis of the data that his basic methodology fully comes out. A synopsis of his position (in regards to this example) is that the poem as a whole (a) reflects a period after the settlement and rise of the monarchy (at the very earliest), and (b) that the original is not related to the Patriarchal narrative at all, but is a series of "emblematic typifications" (verses 25 and 26 are used to make the poem fit better into the genre of a patriarchal blessing; using Dt 33 as a standard). He then gives some grammatical and comparative evidence to substantiate his claim.

One the problems with Van Seters' methodology is the philosophy that by eliminating the problem text or by placing it out of the scope of the particular study being conducted then all is well; When in actuality this procedure may simply make it plain that what we are dealing with is the symptom of a larger problem. In this particular case the

more essential problem may be investigating whether the cultural heritage of a given word or epithet (i.e., 'ēl sadday, etc.) substantiates the dependency of Israel's religion (Yahwism) on an older Canaanite religion.²³

Van Seters' basic philosophy coupled with his use of the Documentary Hypothesis (which has come under increased attack in recent years),²⁴ should lead one to realize that his analysis may end up less than conclusive.²⁵

6) 'ēl 'elyōn:

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of El-Elyon. He blessed him, saying,
 "Blessed be Abram by El-Elyon,
 Creator of heaven and earth.
 And praised by El-Elyon,
 who has delivered your foes to you."
 And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.
 Then the King of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, and you may keep the property."
 But Abram replied to the King of Sodom, "I have sworn to Yahweh, God Most High, Creator of Heaven and earth, that not so much as a thread or a sandle strap would I take of anything that belongs to you, lest you say, "I made Abram rich." (14:18-23)

Two factors come into play (of which Van Seters discusses the first) when considering this passage. The first is the date of the text. Van Seters writes:

...If one accepts the opinion of many literary critics that the text is one of the latest additions to the Pentateuch then it is remarkable how such language is quite appropriate to a late period. It has long been observed that the title used of Melchizedek, as a priest of 'ēl 'elyōn is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament but corresponds to the title used of the high

priesthood during the time of the
Hasmoneans. 26

Van Seters favors a later, Priestly, date for the material.

The second factor is the relationship between Melchizedek's use of "El-Elyon" and Abram's use of "Yahweh, God Most High." Generally it is assumed that Melchizedek calls upon the name of his canaanite god, as was the custom, and Abram later in the narrative identifies Yahweh with this deity.²⁷ Most evangelicals would argue, however, that Abram (or the patriarchal writer) is simply using Melchizedek's language to identify his own god (or better yet that Melchizedek is addressing Yahweh when he refers to 'ēl 'elyōn). At this point the tension of the text seems to call for the recognition of two gods. The first is Melchizedek's El-Elyon and the second is Abram's Yahweh (God Most High). The tension refuses to be lessened by the subjugation of El-Elyon to Yahweh (and thereby ignoring extra-Biblical evidence) or Yahweh to El-Elyon (thus disregarding the context of the verse, and also the plain meaning of much of the Old Testament). A middle position is sought, which the scripture happily provide. E.A. Speiser writes:

As a canaanite priest, Melchizedek would invoke his deity or deities by name.... Abraham, on the other hand, would just as naturally turn to Yahweh, especially in an oath. 28

Van Seters then ends his analysis with three basic conclusions:

- 1) The 'ēl epithets may be explained on the basis of the inner Israelite liturgical tradition.
- 2) By the time of the first millennium B.C. so many epithets were used in common by the major deities that one can hardly argue for a specific history of amalgamation or syncretism between two deities on the basis of only two or three epithets.
- 3) 'ēl had become a general term for deity for a wide range of Semitic languages. It was not the remnant of an earlier age "but represents an increasing effort to identify Yahweh with the one universal deity reflected in the use of the term 'ēl."²⁹

Although I would find fault with his methodology (as has been readily noted) I am in agreement with the ultimate direction of his conclusions.

I would like to close with one observation. A lot has been written about what one can and cannot assume from the text of the patriarchal narrative.³⁰ Nonetheless the burden of proof rests with Alt and others to prove that there is a relationship between the patriarchal writer's use of the 'ēl epithets and the canaanite religions. There is just not enough evidence to assume that because some of these references appear in the patriarchal narrative that the religion of Israel must have evolved from or assimilated a canaanite 'ēl religion.

FOOTNOTES

¹ A. Alt, Essays on Old Testament History and Religion, (Oxford, 1966), 11-77.

² Genesis chapters 12-50.

³ F.M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 1-75.

⁴ John Van Seters, "The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis," Biblica 61 (1980), 220-233.

⁵ ibid., 221.

⁶ ibid., 221-222.

⁷ ibid., 222.

⁸ W. Eichrodt, Old Testament Library: Theology of the Old Testament, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 180.

⁹ Van Seters, 222.

¹⁰ E.A. Speiser, The Anchor Bible: Genesis, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1964). It should be pointed out that unless otherwise noted, I will be using the Anchor Bible.

¹¹ Cross, 49.

¹² Van Seters, 222.

¹³ Van Seters' translation.

¹⁴ Van Seters, 223.

¹⁵ personal class notes, Advance Studies: Matthew. Dr. Robert Morosco, prof. Biola University, 12/10/81.

Footnotes, continued.

¹⁶Van Seters, 224.

¹⁷ibid..

¹⁸Dana & Mantey, A Manuel Grammar of the Greek New Testament, (Toronto, Ontario: The MacMillan Co., 1927), 137.

¹⁹the RSV reads: "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

²⁰Cross, 17ff.

²¹Van Seters, 225.

²²ibid.

²³see Appendix A.

²⁴"By One Hand?" Time 118 (12/7/81), 97 and Derek Kidner, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Genesis, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 16ff.

²⁵see Appendix B for notes on Documentary Hypothesis.

²⁶Van Seters, 228-229.

²⁷Eichrodt, 181.

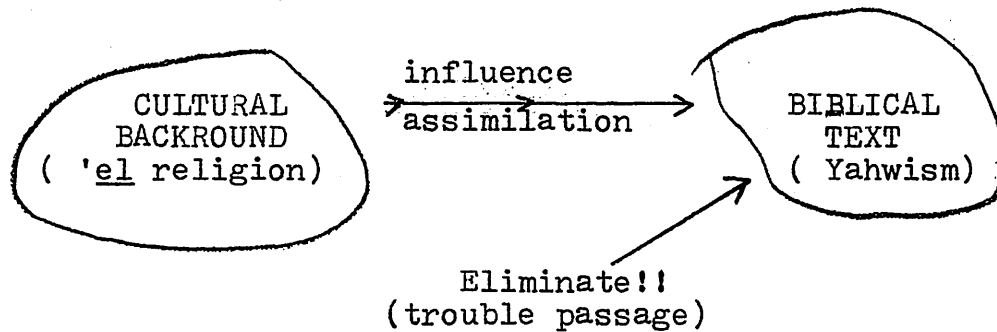
²⁸Speiser, 104.

²⁹Van Seters, 280.

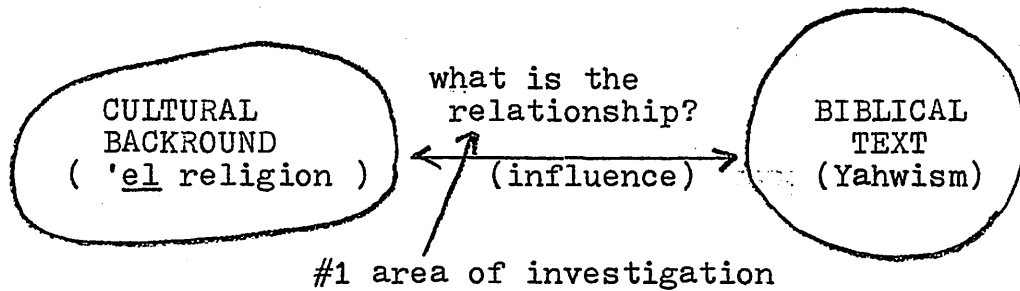
³⁰see page one, paragraph two, etc.

APPENDIX A

1. The "Elimination" Method



2. "Relational" Question



APPENDIX B: The Documentary Hypothesis

The all important point... is that the Pentateuch was in reality a composite work, the product of many hands and periods. This is the fundamental fact behind all recent progress in Biblical study, as it has opened the way to a solution of many difficulties that would otherwise remain unsolved. - E.A. Speiser, Genesis, p.xxi

Thus Speiser gives us a working definition of today's understanding in the area of the Pentateuch and the Documentary Hypothesis. To sufficiently address this subject would easily encompass the work of several scholars much less the work of one undergraduate student. But insofar as the D.H. plays a substantial role in Van Seters' analysis I would like to point out two objections to its use today.

1) The criterion of authorship is unreliable. It is the position of those that hold to the D.H. that the different sources can be identified by, among other things, the various divine names used to identify God. These divine names are used very literally as flags to identify the particular documentary source (see Speiser, p.xxiii). This procedure can be seen as wearing thin in such places as 17:1 and 21:1b where these verses generally attributed to P speak of "Yahweh" (this lapse draws some to write, "Originally 'el... must have stood here," which is a clear case of a system dictating the data rather than the data dictating the system).

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2) The criterion of authorship is not supported by extra-Biblical data. It is very interesting to me that the treatment that the Pentateuch receives is not duplicated in extra-Biblical literature. Derek Kidner (Genesis, p. 20) gives the example where the source is revealed by which pronoun for "I" is used ('anoki for JE, and ani for P); but, when the Ugaritic equivalents occur side by side (Aqhat III.vi.21,23) the critics fail to call for a dual authorship or at least the recognition of a later redactor. This seems to me to be a devastating oversight on the part of scholars that seem to pride themselves in being able to identify and tie together "similar" data from related languages.

*See also
Kitchen
Ancient Orient
and O.T.*

Therefore, Speiser's comment: "The thing to bear in mind, however, is that, where so many unknowns are involved, a reasonable margin of error must be allowed," (Genesis, p. xxi) may be a very tragic understatement.

(For further study see Kidner, Genesis, pp. 16-26).

*Among the major works - W.H. Green The Higher Criticism
of the Pentateuch ;
even non Evangelicals are questioning the theory.
e.g. Rowley O.T. & Modern Study ch. on Pent.
Cassuto The Documentary Hypothesis*

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